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BERNECE BERKMAN AND THE MONOGRAPH: A FEMINIST PERSPECTIVE

A THESIS PRESENTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT

OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE

DEGREE OF MASTER OF ARTS

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BY

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WOMEN'S AND GENDER STUDIES PROGRAM

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CONTENTS

ABSTRACT.....	iii
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Section

1. INTRODUCTION	
2. INTERWOVEN IDENTITIES: ART, POLITICS, AND RELIGION IN CHICAGO, 1920-1945	14
3. GENDERED IDENTITY IN POST WORLD WAR II ARTWORK	23
4. BERKMAN’S ARTISTIC RELATIONS TO DOMESTICITY	29
5. GRAPHIC ARTS IN THE 1960s	37
6. CONCLUSION	47
WORKS CITED	52

ABSTRACT

Bernece Berkman is one of many renowned women artists who has not been historically acclaimed. As women artists have been rediscovered, issues have arisen as to how they should be written about in relation to art history, because the language and canon of art history has revolved around and privileged those of dominant ideology. Writing about women artists using the current conventions of art history is using the same standards that initially marginalized women artists and artists who are not white, middle-upper class, heterosexual, Christian males. Therefore, it is necessary to consider a new language and system of evaluating art in a less exclusive way than the traditional standards. This, in turn, challenges and redefines society's current ideals of artistic success.

In relation to her exclusion from the literature, I argue that the canon of art history perpetuates the dominant ideology at the expense of those with less power, access and agency. Art history has been dominated by monographs, which have historically glorified white male artists while marginalizing those outside the hegemonic ideals. And yet, a monograph can also clearly contextualize an artist's social location, regardless of their historiographic success. A feminist monograph locates women's identities and experiences within the social context that they lived and worked. By highlighting these experiences, it demonstrates the ways in which women have worked in opposition to patriarchal oppression, while identifying the various oppressions specific to each woman as an individual. A feminist monograph is appropriate for Berkman, because it allows for a historically contextualized analysis including the specific social, political, and gendered power relations that existed during her lifetime and that contributed to her erasure. Specifically, Berkman's erasure from art history is examined within

her social locations, as a woman, activist, artist, wife, and Jew within a broader context of the pre and post-World War II art world in Chicago and New York. This critical feminist analysis of Berkman's artwork, as well as her intersecting social locations, recovers her biographical experiences while analyzing the very form of the monograph that also privileges individual biography at the expense of the social whole and totality of subject positions.

SECTION 1

INTRODUCTION

In 1990, a woman rented an art studio in New York City. The landlord told her she could have the first two months rent free if she cleaned up the mess left by the prior occupant. It took the woman nearly the full two months to organize the three-foot pile of paintings, prints, zinc plates, exhibition pamphlets, supplies, personal documents, and other various materials. During this time, the woman realized she was sorting through something other than a heap of rejected items. She was among the artwork and life story of a prominent female artist, Bernece Berkman. In an attempt to preserve and acknowledge the life and work of Berkman, the woman contacted the Library of Congress where the majority of Berkman's files and artworks now currently reside.¹

Berkman is one of many renowned women artists who has not been historically acclaimed. As women artists have been rediscovered, issues have arisen as to how they should be written about in relation to art history, because the language and canon of art history has revolved around and privileged those of dominant ideology. Writing about women artists using the current conventions of art history is using the same standards that initially marginalized women artists and artists who are not white, middle-upper class, heterosexual, Christian males. Therefore, it is necessary to consider a new language and system of evaluating art in a less

¹ Barbara Spector submitted the story of how she came across Bernece Berkman-Hunter's materials in a letter to the Library of Congress in reference to the Library preserving Berkman's items. Spector noted that Berkman had died in poverty and without a will one year prior to Spector's occupancy. Berkman had lived illegally in the cold-water building until her death in 1988. Spector created an inventory list and all was submitted but Berkman's paintings, of which the Library did not have space to store.

exclusive way than the traditional standards. This, in turn, challenges and redefines society's current ideals of artistic success.

Considering my desire to recover a particular artist, Bernece Berkman, while critiquing the very conventions of rediscovery, I investigated the complexities and issues of writing monographs about women artists. A monograph is a concentrated study of an object or person, and art historical monographs have long been a standard mode in the field.² In making decisions for how I should approach Berkman's representation through a monograph, I looked to Kristin Frederickson and Sarah Webb's analysis and compilation of feminist monographs on women artists, *Singular Women*.³ Frederickson detailed in the introduction to the anthology how monographs have historically discriminated against women artists while glorifying white, male artists, elucidating male artistic talent or "genius" as biologically inherent. Given this, some feminist scholars suggested abandoning the use of monographs, but even still, others have proposed that monographs have the potential to disrupt the perpetuation of male hegemony in art.⁴

Specifically, Amy Ingrid Schlegel, an author in *Singular Women*, proposed that if written from a feminist perspective, a monograph appropriately problematized could be a useful tool for recontextualizing women artists in art history. In creating her dissertation on painter and printmaker Nancy Spero, Schlegel combined the elements of a monograph,

² Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock, *Old Mistresses: Women, Art, and Ideology* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981), 3.

³ Kristen Frederickson and Sarah E. Webb, eds., *Singular Women: Writing the Artist* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2003).

⁴ A detailed debate of the use of the monograph for women artists is described by Kristen Frederickson, in her introduction to Kristen Frederickson and Sarah E. Webb, eds., *Singular Women: Writing the Artist* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2003), 6.

the celebratory account of an artist's artwork and biography, and thematic case study, an investigation of the life and work of the artist theoretically, critically, and skeptically.⁵ This combination proposes a feminist monograph. In terms of our current subject, a feminist monograph about Berkman requires the recovery of her biographical information, which criticizes the predominantly male canon, while at the same time includes the social constructs and constraints of her era, which undermines an easy biographical approach to the subject.⁶ A critical investigation and reconstruction of traditional monographs helps move us toward a more inclusive and culturally accurate view of art history. This research more largely contributes to discourses of art history and women's and gender studies by challenging the authorities and standards in which women are represented. It also acknowledges, to a gender studies audience, the ways that art has been a physical method of preservation of feminist change, protest, and progression.⁷

I was inspired to write a monograph about Berkman in this way by Frederickson's question, "Is there a way to reinvent the monograph and the one-person exhibition and disengage [women artists] from their masculinist predecessors, or is a desire to do so simply the

⁵ Amy Ingrid Schlegel, "Codex Spero: Rethinking the Monograph as a Feminist," in *Singular Women: Writing the Artist*, eds. Kristen Frederickson and Sarah E. Webb (Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 2003), 201.

⁶ Amy Ingrid Schlegel, "Codex Spero", 201.

⁷ My intended audience for this research is for my graduate student colleagues in Women's and Gender Studies, as there seems to be a lack of acknowledgement within university curriculum in WGS that art is a large aspect of feminism. Rather than intend this research to address an informed art history audience, I chose to highlight the background of feminist art history and the complexities of addressing rediscovered female artists for a WGS student audience at DePaul University, who likely does not have extensive feminist art history exposure.

manifestation of a nostalgia for less confused theoretical days in the production of art history?”⁸

As a result of her question, I looked to feminist frameworks of renowned feminist art history scholars of the 1970s who were among the leading initiators of a movement to acknowledge female artists of the past and the intricacies of doing so.⁹ Through the influence of these scholars and Frederickson’s question, this monograph on Bernece Berkman is an attempt to reinvent the monograph as feminist by presenting the biographies of artists in tension with the social context of their lives and careers. Particularly, I focus on Berkman’s identity as a female Jewish activist artist working in a style reminiscent of Cubism in Chicago for the Works Progress Administration as well as her fluid identities as a wife, business owner, printmaker, and high artist within the art market of New York during post World War II years.

Kristin Frederickson and Sarah Webb’s anthology, *Singular Women*, demonstrates the various approaches of monographs about women artists.¹⁰ In the introduction, Frederickson emphasized the importance of framing a monograph so that it does not present women artists as an anomaly and further essentialize women artists based on their sex and gender in contrast to the variability of women’s experiences and identities. Furthermore, designating “woman” as a category creates an oppositional binary to men. Women as a group are gendered and subordinate to men, and therefore women’s artwork is less valued than men’s work. Additionally,

⁸ Kristen Frederickson, introduction to Kristen Frederickson and Sarah E. Webb, eds., *Singular Women*, 6.

⁹ Griselda Pollock, *Differencing the Canon: Feminist Desire and the Writing of Art’s Histories* (New York: Routledge, 1999); Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock, *Old Mistresses: Women, Art, and Ideology* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981); Linda Nochlin, “Why Have There Been no Great Women Artists?” *ARTnews* (January 1971): 67-71; Norma Broude and Mary Garrard, eds., *Reclaiming Female Agency: Feminist Art History After Postmodernism* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2005).

¹⁰ Kristen Frederickson, introduction to *Singular Women*, 8.

categorizing women in the singular does not acknowledge the various social locations of all women. Rather, “women” tends to refer to white, heterosexual women, and therefore the various degrees of oppression experienced by non-white women are unacknowledged. Therefore, a feminist monograph locates women’s identities and experiences within the social context that they lived and worked. In this sense, rather than contextualizing Berkman as the singular identity of woman, her erasure can be examined within her social location as a heterosexual, Jewish, female, activist artist and as part of a wider context of the post-World War II art world in Chicago and New York.

Frederickson identifies three types of monographs in *Singular Women* that are common to women artists. The first type of monograph recognizes the superficial aspects of women’s art and “tokenizes” or glorifies female artists. These artists are presented as the only prominent female artists of their era, leaving little reason to explore other women artists during those time periods. In these kinds of analyses, women are often canonized and written about only in relation to male artist counterparts, such as Judith Leyster to Frans Hals and Artemisia Gentileschi to Caravaggio. These depictions assert that these women artists imitated their male companions rather than are innovators themselves. An author in the *Singular Women* anthology, Gail Levin, focuses on marriage and the impact husbands can make on women artists’ careers, as in the case of Jo Nivison Hopper. Levin showed that Nivison Hopper’s husband overshadowed her work while advancing his own career, a common connection between husband and wife artists. Furthermore, unlike traditional monographs of male artists, biographical information such as being a mother or victim of abuse is used as evidence for inspiration for women’s artwork, often misrepresenting the artwork’s intentions and meanings. Whereas in monographs

about men, critics tend not to use biographical information to support the choices men made in their subject matter or stylistic elements.¹¹ The biographical features of this first type of monograph described by Frederickson exemplify the discriminatory elements I seek to avoid in a feminist monograph of Berkman. For example, elaborating on Berkman's abusive marriage could divert attention away from her intended subject matter in her art and misconstrue her themes as related to her relationship.¹²

The second type of monograph included in *Singular Women* describes monographs that address a woman artist's erasure due to the unjust gendering, and therefore subordination, of her artwork. There are two ways that women's artwork has been gendered. One is the type of artwork that is created is considered feminine, and the second is the artist's sex determines the quality of the piece. For example, in the past, craft has been considered a domestic trade and therefore artwork in this mode is often gendered female. Gladys-Marie Fry highlights how this evaluation can limit the authority of a monograph on a woman artist. Her essay on African-American quilter, Harriet Powers, specifies how artwork that is considered "craft" has not been recognized as high art. Another example is the difficulty women face in becoming successful in the androcentric field of architecture, outlined in Nancy Gruskin's essay about Eleanor Agnes

¹¹ Ibid., 9-11.

¹² A large portion of Berkman's biographical information within her files at the Library of Congress is extracted from letters to her divorce lawyer, outlining the incidents and their contexts related to her abusive husband. Reading her biography through the lens of her divorce does not necessarily depict an accurate representation of her overall life and attitudes. In selecting how to highlight Berkman's biography, I chose not to emphasize her marriage; while it appears to have been a significant preoccupation in her life, I felt the sensitive and emotional information could undeservingly overpower other significant aspects of her life and career, agency and oppression. However, exploring how her interracial marriage, abuse, and the reputation of her husband influenced her career is deserving of further investigation and would contribute to future research in gender and visual studies.

Raymond. Gruskin decided to design houses that people wanted to buy rather than avant-garde high modernist homes. Because of this, she was overlooked, as critics did not see her as innovative.¹³ Similarly, Berkman may have been disregarded as unoriginal to art historians because she sold to small galleries and individuals in order to support herself financially and did not exhibit exclusively within large institutions. However, even if women do create art that satisfies the high art world, there is a great deal of struggle to get work exhibited in museums merely because of their biological sex or style of work.¹⁴

The last type of monographic problem addressed by Frederickson is the difficulty of writing monographs that do not oversimplify historical contexts or privilege a particular rendition of an artist's life and work. Several monographs can be written about a single artist, but depending on the approach the author takes, the monographs can be contradictory.¹⁵ As an author, writing about another person's life, I morally struggle with picking out the areas of Berkman's life that I think were the most important or significant. Authors, scholars, and researchers are privileged in having the power to assign meaning and significance to particular events, people, and in this case, styles of art and artists' identities. While I am trying to break down the authorities on these topics and issues, I become an authority myself through writing this monograph and choosing how I want to interpret Berkman's life. I am privileged through being a white, middle class, heterosexual, educated graduate student, conducting research through a university. Because Berkman is not alive to have a voice in regards to this feminist monograph, I have chosen carefully a very specific way that I would like to talk about

¹³ Ibid., 11.

¹⁴ Ibid., 11.

¹⁵ Ibid., 12.

Berkman's life. Instead of looking at the historically glorified events that happened during her lifetime, I analyzed her biographical information, deriving from it what seemed, in my perspective, to be the most significant events to her in her life. From there, I researched the historical events that were happening in the art world and in America during these times. In this way, institutions, museums, and art historians have not dominantly mediated the prominent times of Berkman's life. Rather, I attempted to allow her biography to speak first and the historical context to fill in and support her life story. Furthermore, I did not want to elaborate on any one point in her life, as each aspect could be discussed in length, in order to show the complexities of her identities from her birth until death. However, it is necessary to note that there is much more to her biography than I am stating here, and there are many other ways that her life and work could be analyzed and situated. In the current case, ultimately, a complete account of Berkman would include multiple approaches to her work and life.

Frederickson and Webb's anthology demonstrates that monographs about women tend to focus on a major theme based on one identity of an artist. However, I see that the monograph has potential to convey a more feminist perception by looking across many disciplines, identities, and social locations, rather than concentrating on one identity. Analyzing the intersectionality of peoples' various identities will provide greater meaning and understanding of an individual's social location, which furthermore works against the categorization of people based on a single shared identity. Therefore, in writing a feminist monograph on Berkman, I aim to exemplify the ways her social and artistic identities were often in tension, which ultimately played into her artistic choices, limits, and acclaim. In this way, her biography is acknowledged, but is also proven insignificant in addressing her complexity without providing her social context.

In writing a feminist monograph about Bernece Berkman, it is valuable to identify the ways feminist art historians have dealt with the reclamation of women artists. In particular, the 1970s and 1980s saw an important set of first and second wave feminists that tackled the problems and possibilities of the monograph. Linda Nochlin is a leader of feminist art history scholarship and the questioning of institutional structures.¹⁶ Furthering the feminist discourse, Griselda Pollock and Rozsika Parker have deconstructed the canon and ideology of art history itself,¹⁷ while Norma Broude and Mary Garrard propose that feminist art history should focus on women's subjectivity and their accomplishments despite patriarchal and institutional oppression.¹⁸ All allude to the traditional monograph and either reject the monograph altogether or point to how a successful monograph can be achieved.

Linda Nochlin, a social historian, was the first feminist scholar to address the lack of women in art history. She posed the famous question, "Why have there been no great women artists?" in an essay in 1971. Nochlin claimed that finding examples of great women artists does not challenge the underlying assumptions of women's erasure, but rather "tacitly reinforces its negative implications."¹⁹ In other words, simply inserting women into the canon of art history does not address the reasons they were initially excluded. Furthermore, Nochlin criticized the essentialist notion of defining a particular feminist style that is separate from men's, as there are not particular styles or forms that are uniquely feminine. Artwork by women is better linked to that of their male counterparts of their own time period rather than to each other. Taking the

¹⁶ Linda Nochlin, "Why Have There Been no Great Women Artists?," 67-71.

¹⁷ Parker and Pollock, *Old Mistresses*, xvii.

¹⁸ Norma Broude and Mary Garrard, eds., introduction to *Reclaiming Female Agency: Feminist Art History after Postmodernism*, 3.

¹⁹ Nochlin, "No Great Women Artists," 67-71.

former approach perpetuates women's marginality and does not address their individual subjectivities.²⁰ Following this model, I do not compare Berkman's art to other women artists' work across history.

Nochlin did not endorse male artistic "genius" as an inherent biological trait. Rather, she argued that artists acquire their skills through practice and education. For example, not mentioned in traditional monographs about artistic "geniuses" is that frequently, great male artists had fathers who were artists that passed on their artistic skills to their sons, rather than to their daughters. Nochlin proposed that it is not inherent female biological traits or oppressive hegemonic and patriarchal powers that are solely responsible for the lack of great women artists. Rather, she held the institutional and educational systems accountable.

Nochlin acknowledged that despite the social and institutional forces working against marginalized people, many have still managed to achieve greatness. Therefore, Nochlin opposed traditional monographs that glorify artistic "genius." Situated within a social historical perspective, Nochlin holds social structures accountable for women's subjugation in art while still giving significance to artists' biographies.²¹ A critical analysis of Berkman's biography specifically located within the social structures she was working with and against, illuminates the ways in which Berkman's various identities simultaneously were privileged and marginalized, which worked both for and against her acclaim in history.

Nearly ten years after Nochlin's essay, Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock in 1980, pushed Nochlin's reclamation of women artists several steps further, by indicating how the ideology of art history is androcentric. Parker and Pollock did not aim to prove that great women

²⁰ Ibid., 67-71.

²¹ Ibid., 67-71.

artists exist but rather to deconstruct the ideology of art history to reveal how it operates in opposition to women's work. Pollock and Parker's argument differed from Nochlin's in that they "purposely avoid presenting the history of women in art as merely a fight against exclusion from and discrimination by institutions such as academies of art."²² They proposed that even if institutional structures changed to be more inclusive of women, patriarchal ideology within society would still exist, which is the root of discrimination. While Nochlin's position proposed that reconstructing the social structures of education and institutions would bring forward feminist progress, Parker and Pollock argued, from a Marxist perspective, that the deconstruction of social ideology of gender would produce social change.

Furthermore, Parker and Pollock challenged socially constructed gender norms and dominant ideology through examining feminine stereotypes and the misuse of women's biographies. Likewise, the underlying assumptions in art history were challenged, such as who decides what is considered art, how it has been acceptable to exclude female artists from the canon, who can be considered as artists, and what the status of artist means. Because dominant ideology perpetuates stereotypes as "normal" and "natural," Parker and Pollock argued it is important to analyze art history's tools for conveying epistemological knowledge, as these tools may unintentionally perpetuate feminine stereotypes.²³ Critiquing the tools, such as the traditional monograph, in which art history has situated its "knowledge," aids in recognizing the socially constructed ideologies that have led to Berkman's erasure.

Griselda Pollock further wrote on the critique of art history's androcentric canon in her essay, "Differencing: Feminism's Encounter with the Canon." She outlined three positions of

²² Parker and Pollock, *Old Mistresses*, xviii.

²³ *Ibid.*, 3.

feminisms encounter with the canon. The first position was to add more women to art historical texts and give more credit and acknowledgement to “decorative” arts and fine arts. The second position was to give as much prestige and significance to the feminine sphere as the masculine sphere receives, a sphere which unrepresentatively defines “normal.” Lastly, discourse needs to span across all disciplines, genders, identities, institutions, and cultures in order to be most inclusive and eliminate the male-female dichotomy. This cannot be undone by creating a feminist canon, as even feminism still works within categories, and categories altogether need to be eradicated.²⁴ Pollock determined that the larger the movement is across canons, disciplines, texts, and the re-reading of texts, the more meaning will develop between the lines. Art history does not merely report what happened, but the semiotics and language used to record and document art history and artists creates the discourse, which forms history in very specific ways and is typically conveyed of dominant perceptions.

While Pollock argues that women cannot be written about in the canon of art history as it is known today, Norma Broude and Mary Garrard suggest in their introduction to *Reclaiming Female Agency: Feminist Art History After Postmodernism*, that monographs of women can be successfully written if the social context is properly addressed. They use a social historical methodology and are willing to use biography in order to excavate women artists’ agency. Monographs should be written to show that women have always had agency, but patriarchy has continually neutralized it. Broude and Garrard explain that in the 1970s, the system of patriarchy was questioned by feminist art historians. However, in the 1980s, feminist art history began to include the scope of gender studies, recognizing that gender is socially constructed.

²⁴ Pollock, *Differencing*, 23-29.

Interrogating feminism within the system of patriarchy became more complex as feminist art historians began to “situate female experience within a larger framework of multiple and fluid gendered identities and positions, and to consider gender as only one of the many factors in a constantly shifting and evolving, often tensely balanced, pattern of power relationships.”²⁵ Like Pollock, Broude and Garrard acknowledge that gender is not the only power issue at hand, that class, race, ethnicity, and gender as constructed by society are also problems in themselves.

In addressing a possible monograph on Berkman, it becomes clear that neither Nochlin’s theory nor Parker and Pollock’s position can solely address the erasure of women throughout art history. Both ideological and institutional structures contribute to marginalization. Therefore, they must be kept in tension with each other in order to further feminist and gender ideals. Both Nochlin’s theory of institutional structures and Parker and Pollock’s ideological critique can be used to elucidate how the canon and institutions have worked both for and against Berkman’s erasure. However, in light of Broude and Garrard’s feminist perceptions, I also argue for an analysis that includes Berkman’s specific social locations. Identifying and contextualizing these can best place her within her own subjectivity, rather than as a projection of the subjectivity of the author.

A feminist monograph of Berkman will contribute to further research on women artists and modern American art by revealing the ways that Berkman flourished despite her oppressive constraints while noting her privileges as well. Broude and Garrard suggest that women have had various degrees of agency, which Berkman exemplifies. Rather than evaluating Berkman’s career and life from her agency as a woman, it is more constructive to identify her in more

²⁵ Broude and Garrard, *Reclaiming Female Agency*, 1.

complex terms as a Jew, heterosexual, artist, waged worker, wife, and activist within the U.S. social system during and after the Depression. Instead of a feminist monograph on Berkman that only reflects how she was silenced by these identities, it will also reflect how she still had privilege within each of her identities' position despite these social constraints. For example, while Berkman lived in Chicago, she seemed to have highlighted her Jewish identity in order to advance her career. Yet while living in New York, her Jewish identity falls away to her image as a business owner and high artist. She had the privilege of choosing when and when not to emphasize her associations as a Jew.

SECTION 2

INTERWOVEN IDENTITIES: ART, POLITICS, AND RELIGION IN CHICAGO, 1920-1945

While Berkman adhered to the conventional modes of drawing and painting, she also was an innovator in the rising technologies of printmaking. However, major institutions and art historians have mediated canon formation and have been the authorities in determining what is high art. Art history has not changed radically enough to recognize printmaking as one of the leading forms of high art, as its duplicability does not compliment the reverence of an original. In this way, Berkman challenged art historical boundaries by being an innovator in graphic arts, which in today's standards holds high acclaim. Furthermore, in seeking to create new conventions and language for describing art, recognizing Berkman as an innovator in printmaking aids in creating a modern redefinition of successful art.

Berkman's personal artistic goals were oriented towards becoming part of the high art market, as she took formal classes and actively exhibited her pieces early in her life in order to achieve her goals.²⁶ Her Jewish identity was a way into an area of Chicago's art community. She was born into a Jewish family on June 6, 1910 in Chicago, Illinois to her Russian father, Samuel, and American mother, Florence.²⁷ Her identity as a female was secondary to being Jewish at this point in her life. While being both female and Jewish had the potential to oppress her success as an artist, she was privileged in the sense that she was able to choose when and when not to highlight her identity as Jewish to benefit her career. She took lessons from Jewish artists and exhibited within Jewish institutions.²⁸ At sixteen years old, she took evening classes for two years, from 1927 – 1929, at the Art Institute of Chicago (AIC). However, in 1929, Berkman no longer had the financial means to continue her classes.²⁹

Berkman's artistic stature may be attributed to her conscious stylistic choices to portray geometric forms of abstract images using bold lines and colors, which were trendy elements within the high art market at the time. Berkman's style likely derived from her teachers' artwork, which was reminiscent of Cubism. After AIC classes, her formal artistic education continued in 1930, when she began taking sketching lessons in the evenings with Todros Geller.³⁰ Geller was

²⁶ Biography of Bernece Berkman. "Chicago Artists Biographie: June 1936, Bernece Berkman," Art Institute of Chicago Pamphlet Files, 1936 (Chicago, IL).

²⁷ Bernece Berkman-Hunter Divorce Files, Manuscript Reading Room, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. Library of Congress.

²⁸ Biography of Bernece Berkman, Art Institute of Chicago Pamphlet Files.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

known for his paintings and woodcuts portraying Jewish themes, objects, and activities.³¹ As her sketching lessons progressed, Berkman additionally took on weekend oil painting classes with Geller in 1932.³² At twenty-three years old, Berkman had her first exhibition at the Palmer House where she exhibited with other Jewish artists.³³ This was her first of many exhibitions. For the next two years she exhibited at various places across Chicago and even had a solo show in 1936 at the College of Jewish Studies.³⁴ Geller was likely a key figure in Berkman's visibility in the Jewish art community.

The thematization and expression of Berkman's Jewish identity are evident in her woodcut, *Toward a Newer Life* (1937), which was in the exhibit "A Gift to Biro-Bidjan: Chicago, 1937," along with Todros Geller. This woodcut is one that features Berkman's initial visual social commentaries.³⁵ In analyzing, *Toward a Newer Life*, Susan Weininger claims Berkman used Jewish themes to express scenes of the Depression. Berkman coupled sadness with hope by depicting the Bible story of Jews in Egyptian slavery in the guise of working class laborers in the United States. Weininger states of Berkman's woodcut, "The theme of the slavery in Egypt followed by the exodus to the Promised Land serves as a message for universal social justice, as well as for the Jewish desire for a homeland."³⁶ Berkman's woodcut, *Toward a Newer Life* depicts stylistic and thematic elements similar to that of Geller's. With Geller being

³¹ Andrea Swanson, 1986. *Prints of Chicago 1900-1945: Changing Attitudes Towards the Modern City as seen in Graphic Works by Chicago's Local Artists*. Master's thesis, University of Chicago.

³² Biography of Bernece Berkman, Art Institute of Chicago Pamphlet files.

³³ The name of this exhibition was not included in her one page biography in the Biography of Bernece Berkman, Art Institute of Chicago Pamphlet files, 1936.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Oakton Community College. "A Gift to Biro-Bidjan: Chicago, 1937 From Despair to New Hope," <http://www.oakton.edu/museum/Berkman.html>.

³⁶ Ibid., 2.

one of Berkman's first teachers, his artwork, specifically its Cubist elements and forms, was likely influential in Berkman's own artwork.

However, Berkman's social and artistic identities matured as she became an activist artist within the Works Project Administration. As Berkman gained visibility through the federally funded program, the Works Project Administration of the New Deal, her work shifted from Jewish themes and abstract forms to more American political statements and social realist elements. Her work produced during and for the New Deal's economic reform program, which paid artists to create work for tax-supported institutions, was a significant beginning to her artistic career. Edward Bruce, director of the Public Works of Art Project, set the precedents of what type of artwork was to be accepted for government funding in later programs like the Federal Art Project. He wrote in the forward of an exhibit catalog of 1934, "Artists were selected on the basis of their qualifications as artists and their need for employment. The subject matter assigned to them was the American scene in all its phases. Within this scope the artists were given the utmost freedom of expression."³⁷ The aims of this program were to provide jobs for talented artists during the Great Depression in the United States, to make high quality art available to the general public and make the general public more interested in art. Bruce wanted artists to portray the American scene, but only if the art was not thought provoking. He is quoted saying, "The artist's business is to help people to see and enjoy seeing and not think. We are all thinking too much and laughing too little."³⁸ The Federal Art Project ended in 1943 because the government began focusing more on the War rather than non-combat issues.

³⁷ Susan Weininger, *After the Great Crash: New Deal Art in Illinois*, by Illinois State Museum, (Springfield: Illinois State Museum, 1983), 2.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

Berkman entered into the Chicago art community through her affiliations with Jewish artists and Cubist-like style, but upon working for the WPA, Berkman began to develop her own identity as an artist, as activist and social realist. This was elucidated in her art of the 1938 “Art for the Public” exhibition for Chicago artists of the Federal Art Project. She exhibited three works, two in watercolors, *South Chicago Series #2* and *Picnic*, and one print, *Boys at Play*.³⁹ *Boys at Play* depicts Berkman’s distinct geometric style, using harsh angles and bold lines to create a circular composition of three boys playing in the street of the city. However, in comparison to *Towards a Newer Life*, one can see that she shifted from geometric to more natural forms, as the boys’ figures are more representative of life than the figures in her woodcut. Furthermore, her subject matter converted from Jewish themes to depictions of American life. Through the shift in her style and content, a reflection of Berkman’s shift in dominant identities emerged.

While Berkman’s personal goals were to identify largely as a gender-neutral artist, society and the media recognized her identity as a woman. The Federal Art Project provided opportunities for women’s artwork to become more visible in society through FAP’s exhibitions. However, as critics gendered women’s art based solely on their sex, their artwork was stereotyped and subordinated, in comparison to men’s art, at the same time it gained visibility. Berkman was an active participant in the Federal Art Project, which provided not only visibility for her as an artist, but an income. However, in contextualizing what this visibility from the Federal Art Project meant for women, Susan Weininger said, “The arts became a feminized

³⁹ Chicago Artists of the Federal Art Project. “Art for the Public,” Harold Washington Library Pamphlet Files, (Chicago, IL, 1938).

occupation, giving women access at the same time as they were devalued by society at large.”⁴⁰

Not having the pressures of institutional standards, Weininger expressed that women artists were able to depict more powerful and unique images than men artists. This allowed women artists more freedom in style, form, and subject matter. However, while “femininity” gave women’s art more freedom in subject matter, style, and form, it compromised their work’s acclaim when it came to recognition. While women’s artwork was institutionally given more visibility and stylistic freedom, ideologically women’s art was marginalized based on its association with femininity.⁴¹ In these ways, Berkman’s work was given visibility that she may not have had without the FAP. However, her biological sex may have been an unconscious determinate for the subordination of her artwork by critics of her time.

In addition to the gendering of Berkman’s artistic identity, Berkman’s FAP career can also be viewed from a political activist perspective. Andrew Hemingway historicizes the Communist art movement in America from a Marxist position. With the Great Depression beginning in America in 1929, some Americans lost confidence in capitalism. Some Americans suffering from the economic effects of the Depression looked to socialism as an economic solution. Not all artists were equally as dedicated to the American Communist Party and had various reasons for their association. Hemingway notes, “For some it was a political lodestar for almost all of their careers, for others it stood more as a symbol of their commitment to certain aesthetic and ethical ideals, and for many more it was the object of their enthusiasm only during the economic and social dislocations of the Depression.” According to Hemingway, graphic arts

⁴⁰ Susan Weininger, *The “New Woman” in Chicago, 1910-1945: Paintings from Illinois Collections*, [Rockford, IL: Illinois State Museum, 1993], 1.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 1.

during the Depression, has been given little recognition, in part because of its association with Communism, but provides great insight into American culture.⁴²

Berkman's reputation as an acclaimed artist was evident through her membership in the American Artists' Congress, because her artistic standing in Chicago allowed her membership.⁴³ Just before World War II began, some leftist artists worked to remove national prejudices and ideas, aiming for the working class to have greater participation in social power. The American Artists' Congress' (AAC) main aims were to respond to the Great Depression in America, the spread of fascism in central Europe, and the Spanish Civil War. It began in 1935 and lasted through 1942. Seeing the major political issues arising in Europe, the AAC worked against fascism becoming widespread in America as well. They did so by creating artwork and did not discriminate against any type of artistic style or media. The committee of the AAC "decided that the congress, unlike the Artists' Union, should be limited to 'artists of standing,' which meant that an artist had to have an 'important exhibition, an award or other professional achievement which gave him "standing" in the opinion of the majority of the members present...'"⁴⁴ With Berkman's proven high artistic standing within the Chicago art community, she was one of the 114 "Signers of the Call" of the American Artists' Congress.⁴⁵

While Berkman's involvement in the Work Projects Administration and American Artists' Congress demonstrates her prominence as an artist during her time, it is also important to

⁴² Andrew Hemingway, *Artists on the Left: American Artists and the Communist Movement 1926-1956*, (London: Yale University Press, 2002), 1.

⁴³ Matthew Baigell and Julia Williams, preface to *Artists Against War and Fascism: Papers of the First American Artists' Congress*, (New Brunswick, NY: Rutgers University Press, 1986), 3-52.

⁴⁴ Baigell and Williams, preface to *Artists Against War and Fascism*, 10.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 50.

note that, despite her identity as a woman, Berkman was also acclaimed by some critics of her time as well. For example, Berkman's Work Projects Administration artwork was exhibited in major institutions such as the Art Institute of Chicago. Berkman was a part of the Art Institute of Chicago's annual exhibitions, having works included in the Watercolor and Chicago Annual Exhibitions in 1940 and 1941. Edith Weigle's 1941 article in the *Chicago Daily Tribune* tells of the International Water Color exhibition at the Art Institute of Chicago. She states the three jurors of the show, one from New York City, Iowa City, and Chicago and the winners of the show, none of which are from Chicago. However, Weigle mentions Berkman as being one of the Chicago artists in the exhibit.⁴⁶ This implies that there was likely heavy politics involved in the selection of the winners, but despite that, Weigle felt that Berkman's work was deserving of recognition.

Furthermore, a *Chicago Daily Tribune* article of 1949, by Gary Sheahan, expressed Berkman's recognition towards achieving a place within the high art market while she was alive, but at the same time exemplifies that current societal beliefs are not always documented in history. He wrote an article to advertise to the Chicago public a book of printmakers. He claimed that printmakers are able to express thoughts more powerfully than painters, evident in the book "American Prize Prints of the 20th Century". He referred to Berkman as one of the big name printmakers in America.⁴⁷ This commentary illuminates how Berkman was consistently working towards becoming a part of the mainstream market (that is, the canon), and shows that critics of her time felt she was deserving of being part of it as well. However, what was depicted

⁴⁶ Edith Weigle, "International water color exhibit opens," (*Chicago Daily Tribune*, July 20, 1941).

⁴⁷ Gary Sheahan, "Show Chicago printmakers' works in book," (*Chicago Daily Tribune*, November 20, 1949).

as high art in her time, such as printmaking, was not necessarily validated by art historians in canon formation later in history.

In 1939, Fritzi Weisenborn wrote in the *Sunday Times* newspaper that Berkman was an artist capable of raising Chicago's artistic status among U.S. cities.⁴⁸ Her article reflected her anger towards the Art Institute of Chicago for replacing its existing jury with three men of the Art Institute, which Weisenborn suggests was a political move that prevented deserving artists, such as Berkman, from being acknowledged in the exhibit. Weisenborn claims that if the Art Institute of Chicago would praise the brilliant work of local Chicago artists rather than non-local artists, Chicago's high art market would become more developed and prominent in America. Berkman was specifically mentioned as one of the artists whose work was not only rejected from the AIC's annual exhibition but was accepted into the art exhibition of New York's World Fair of 1939. Weisenborn informed the Chicago residents through her article that it was their responsibility to help get local artists into the AIC, not just the responsibility of Chicago artists.⁴⁹ Weisenborn pointed out that there were merely a few men in Chicago who had control over which artists were considered the most talented, specifically stating that Berkman was one of the artists who was wrongfully rejected.

Weisenborn's argument highlights the way institutions have more control in determining definitions of high art, whereas exhibiting in places such as the World's Fair does not have as high of a place in institutional hierarchy. In these terms, Berkman's acceptance in the World's Fair does not automatically mean she belonged at the Art Institute of Chicago, from the perspectives of art historians and critics. These discriminatory power relations exemplify the

⁴⁸ Fritzi Weisenborn, 1939. Art Institute's lions are jittery. *Sunday Times*, March 6.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

need for a modern view of defining successful art. Weisenborn's article was a progressive attempt during that era at addressing issues of unequal representations and limitations within the art world.

Throughout Berkman's Chicago life, her identities as a woman, Jewish, activist, and artist intersected. Her social identity as a Jewish artist developed early in her life and career, which was a way for her to become a member of the Jewish art community. This cultural affiliation also introduced her to the artistic style that she maintains for the rest of her career, which are elements reminiscent of Cubism. These social identities opened up more opportunities for Berkman to develop her identity as an artist, and figure of the canon, which was exemplified by her shift into social realism and activism. While Berkman was brought into the public eye through her prints, printmaking did not become a high art within the canon of art history.

SECTION 3

GENDERED IDENTITY IN POST WORLD WAR II ARTWORK

The way that society had gendered Berkman's work because of her biological sex deserves closer examination. Saltzman describes the post-war era of America for women artists in the 1940s and 1950s, specifically looking at the New York School as a microcosm of the American art world during this time.⁵⁰ Women were a part of the New York School, and they did not leave the art world as a result of men returning from the war. Therefore, women's sex contributed to their social artistic advancement, as they did not have to go fight in the war, and

⁵⁰ Lisa Saltzman, "Reconsidering the Stain" in Norma Broude and Mary Garrard, eds., *Reclaiming Female Agency: Feminist Art History After Postmodernism* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2005), 373.

women began to be acknowledged in the art world. Saltzman theorized “in the face of radical societal transformation, as well as radical artistic developments, art criticism turned these complex paintings into either heroic symbols of masculinity or denigrated emblems of femininity.”⁵¹ Women’s new place in the art world was publicized, but it was depicted as threatening. “The art world was described as ‘under siege,’ threatened by a ‘feminine invasion,’ such anxious language reflecting the broader societal message that the former preserves of men were rapidly losing their insularity or, more pointedly, that a woman’s true place was not in the studio but in the home.”⁵² At this point, societal conditions changed for women, who were then expected to stay in the home after the WPA was over and return to traditional female gender roles.

Despite the extreme similarities and “femininity” in the artwork of both male and female abstract painters, such as Berkman, male artists tended to be ascribed masculine identities, of dominance and intention, characteristics to their artwork, while women artist’s work was associated with nature, accident, decorative, subordinate, and passivity. Furthermore, if men’s artwork was described as feminine, it was the talent inherent in males to be able to capture this femininity, not femininity inherent within the male’s being. However, these assignments of gender roles are completely arbitrary, as there are no distinct male or female styles of painting. Being post World War II, establishing strict definitions of gender roles was an ideological method for restoring social order, particularly since women were a threat to the once established male superiority in the art world.⁵³

⁵¹ Ibid., 374.

⁵² Ibid., 375.

⁵³ Ibid.

Berkman's connections to the Works Project Administration and political art provided her more lasting historical visibility than did her artwork she created once she moved to New York. Information on her New York life and career resides largely in the Library of Congress files rather than readily available resources such as publications and online resources. Because Berkman's later work is less publicly assessable than her early career in the WPA, a feminist critical investigation of the social context of New York and her New York artwork are needed to understand the implications for her later life erasure. One of these factors was that Berkman's artwork shifted its subject from politics to nature.

One of the critical implications of Berkman's erasure is the transition from federally sponsored political artwork to her depictions of sea life and nature. Berkman's favorite subject matter was themes of the ocean and its conservation. Being funded by the WPA, Berkman was limited in what she depicted, as the WPA paid artists to portray scenes of American life to boost the morale of Americans during World War II. Berkman moved to New York in 1946, shortly after World War II had ended.⁵⁴ Once she was no longer employed by the U.S. government, Berkman had more freedom in the themes that she depicted in her artwork. Rather than portraying American life, she shifted to depicting symbols of the sea, upon moving to New York. She had renovated an old farmhouse in Bridge Hampton, Long Island to become a summer home and studio, as many famous artists such as Jackson Pollock and Lee Krasner had done in nearby East Hampton. Her portrayals of sea life were likely a conscious choice, as sea themes were a trend of the artists living in the artistically acclaimed town of East Hampton.⁵⁵ However, her

⁵⁴ Library of Congress Divorce Files, Bernece Berkman Files, Manuscript Reading Room, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

⁵⁵ Artists and East Hampton: A 100 Year Perspective (East Hampton: Guild Hall, 1976).

conscious decision to depict popular aquatic themes also would have been more likely gendered feminine, and therefore “lesser” than men’s art, because of its subject’s relation to nature, working against her acclaim in the high art market.

While Berkman’s nature themes may not have been viewed negatively or gendered during her life, art historians have perceived and documented work pertaining to nature as feminine and passive, while themes of science were gendered masculine and dominant. Some feminist art historians have proposed that the gendered relationship between nature and science that art critics have cited as implicit in the work of male and female artists is grounding for the subordination of women artists as a whole. Therefore, Berkman’s intentional choice to depict sea themes may have benefited her career during her lifetime but likely worked against her in becoming a lasting figure in the canon, as art historians subordinated themes of nature. Evidence for Berkman’s work being discredited because of her subject matter relating to nature is supported by Norma Broude’s analysis of the regendering of Impressionism.⁵⁶

Norma Broude proposed that art critics have regendered Impressionism as masculine in order for it to be critically acclaimed. Historically in Western society, nature has been gendered female, which has implications of being passive, emotional, and mysterious. On the contrary, science has been gendered male, which is active, dominant and objective. During the Renaissance, art became associated with science. Because science dominates and uncovers the mysteries of nature, art became scientific when one-point perspective was discovered as a systematic way to replicate scenes of nature and female models. Drawing became known as

⁵⁶ Norma Broude, “The Gendering of Impressionism” in Norma Broude and Mary Garrard, eds., *Reclaiming Female Agency: Feminist Art History After Postmodernism* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2005), 217.

masculine and rational while color was feminine and emotional. These perceptions of nature and science carried into the 19th century and into schools of the Impressionists in France.

To Impressionists, a painting was successful if the viewer had the same emotional response from the painting as the viewer does when experiencing nature. However, during this era, high art was based on optical realism and was created through the traditional conventions of drawing and linear perspective. Art was a product of science and its ability to replicate, or control, nature. Impressionists used fluid brushstrokes of color without conventions of drawing and line. It was founded on color, tone, and abstraction, which was criticized for not being true to reality. It was not considered high art. Critics saw this style of painting as a threat to the artists' masculinity. Therefore, critics in favor of Impressionism attempted to explain Impressionism's style as scientific. With the rise of technology in the 1870s through the 1880s, science revealed that the human eye sees only color and tone. Therefore, line is only an illusion. Based on this discovery, critics in favor of Impressionism argued that Impressionist paintings were more true to reality, as they represented the true way humans see. Even though Impressionism's foundation was based on emotions, feelings, and nature, it had come to be associated with science, and therefore associated with masculinity.⁵⁷

This perception of masculinity and femininity within line, drawing, color and fluidity had carried into the twentieth century and Abstract Expressionism. Even though Abstract Expressionism claimed to defy the traditional conventions of art and realism, critics still tended to identify connections between science, control, and power to art produced by males, and therefore, the art was considered high art, while art that critics associated with nature, was

⁵⁷ Ibid.

considered passive, feminine, subordinate, and therefore unworthy of the canon. Broude notes that art has historically been given more value if it is supportive of traditional masculinity. While subjectivity and the labeling of masculine and feminine changes over time, it remains constant that masculinity is privileged.⁵⁸

Furthermore, Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock specify that the feminine stereotype was created from women's art becoming linked with femininity, which is socially constructed as subordinate to masculinity. Therefore, it became naturalized that women's art was of lesser value than men's art. Parker and Pollock suggest that the sex of the artist had determined the rank of the art, and this relationship was explicitly demonstrated in the example of flower painters. Flower painting began as a "high" art form, but because there were a lot of women painting flowers, the genre was later categorized historically as "decorative." This was the beginning of the problematic social stereotype of "woman" being linked to "feminine," and feminine being linked to passivity and subordination.⁵⁹

This ideological perception subconsciously gendered Berkman's artwork as "lesser" because of her sex and gender. While Berkman's stylistic elements of bold lines and colors are traditionally masculine, her biological sex inhibits and discredits her artwork from being as good as men's. For example, C.J. Bulliet, in describing Berkman and her WPA work of 1938, said she "has all the faults of a violent revolutionist" and "paints with deadly earnestness, with explosive expletives, and maenad-like fury."⁶⁰ These are traditionally masculine descriptions, which subconsciously give more value to her work. Furthermore, "masculine" traits justified Bulliet's

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Parker and Pollock, *Old Mistresses*, 51.

⁶⁰ C.J. Bulliet, "Around the Galleries," *The Chicago Daily News*, [23 July 1938].

praise of a woman's work. However, he also commented that her "color sense seems instinctive," implying that her biological sex contributes to her skill with color, a stereotype of women artists. He stated that the distortion of her figures is "learned from the 'trend of the times' in American leftist art, and not at all innate, I believe, in Bernece Berkman,"⁶¹ discrediting her by suggesting Berkman was influenced by dominant, or male, styles of art, rather than being a leader and innovator in her style. Artwork from this era in Berkman's career still exists in institutions today like the Art Institute of Chicago and New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art. However, artwork from her later career depicts scenes of nature, particularly of the sea, which is gendered as "feminine" subject matter, and are not present in major institutions, insinuating that her works labeled more traditionally feminine were of lesser value than her WPA art, which was masculinized by art critics.

SECTION 4

BERKMAN'S ARTISTIC RELATIONS TO DOMESTICITY

Berkman made specific choices in her location, both physically and figuratively, within the American art world. She and her husband, Oscar Hunter, moved to New York City, the center of the market for U.S. visual arts, in 1946 as an aspiring artist and writer, respectively.⁶² After Berkman moved to New York her identities as a woman and artist became more complex. Not only was she a wife, but she also took on a new role as a female business partner. She became heavily involved in the textile industry with the founding of a wallpaper company with

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Library of Congress Divorce Files, Bernece Berkman Files, Manuscript Reading Room, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

her new husband. Furthermore, she continued her artistic career by participating in several graphic arts organizations, exhibiting not only nationwide but internationally as well.⁶³ Over these years, Berkman accumulated many awards for her Cubist-influenced graphic artwork, especially her scenes of sea life. She also worked on her social position as an artist, moving to and becoming part of the trendy artist community of East Hampton, home of Jackson Pollock and Lee Krasner.⁶⁴ She exhibited in the 1960s with these famous Abstract Expressionists at Guild Hall. In these first decades in New York, she left her WPA activism behind, but seemed to manage to combine the various subject positions of wife, financial partner, dedicated artist, and clever negotiator of a complex cultural scene.

And yet, the dominant role that husbands often play in such biographical narratives limited and challenged any further expansion of Berkman's intersecting identities, particularly once the collapse of their marriage undermined her economic and social stability. After leaving her thriving wallpaper business to her husband and his mistress in 1970 because of her husband's violence and physical and emotional abuse, Berkman lived off her art sales and supplemental income working at a department store. Her role as an artist became primary to her, although it

⁶³ For example, in just one exhibition in 1958, Berkman's work traveled with the American Color Print Society to the Free Library of Philadelphia, Indiana University, Palmer House Galleries in Chicago, Miami University in Ohio, Louisiana Art Commission, Purdue University, Kenosha Public Museum in Wisconsin, Contemporary Paintings in Atlantic City, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Colby Jr. College in New Hampshire, Adelphi College in New York, Cornell University, Earlham College in Indiana, Wisconsin State College, Clemson College, University of Wisconsin, Blum Store in Philadelphia, and Columbus Museum in Georgia. This was listed in the 1958 pamphlet for the exhibition, which is among Berkman's files at the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C. Along with these pamphlets, resumes from her later life state that she was part of an exhibit in Norway and had artworks that exhibited in China.

⁶⁴ Artists and East Hampton: A 100 Year Perspective (East Hampton: Guild Hall, 1976).

was also in these years when she rekindled the social support of the Jewish community that had marked the start of her artistic career. She continued to exhibit, specifically at the Hartford Jewish Community Center. Yet, her struggles with her husband over the divorce and ownership of property and the wallpaper company left her remaining life in an impoverished state.⁶⁵ Hence, the New York years further exemplify the problems and possibilities of the monograph. Through uncovering her biography and subject positions, Berkman's career is recovered for art history, allowing her to take her place among other more well known artists. And yet, her fluid and complex identities were socially and variably constructed, requiring us to de-center her agency at key points of the history in favor of other actors and conditions of which she was a part.

Berkman's acclaim in the New York art world revolved in and around her co-ownership of a wallpaper company with her husband and the tensions within her marriage. Berkman and Hunter moved to New York without jobs. Through the help of friends, Hunter was able to get a job within the fur industry that had been flourishing as a result of World War II, and Berkman found employment as well. They both worked for a year and a half before Oscar was promoted to supervisor and Berkman transitioned to domesticity. Berkman wrote, "we decided for reasons of taxes and my career as an artist, that I quit the job I was doing well at and stay home – keep house, and develop as a painter."⁶⁶ However, the traditional roles of the housewife and the breadwinner were short-lived, as Hunter was laid off from work with \$38.00 per week for

⁶⁵ Library of Congress Donor Files, Bernece Berkman Files, Manuscript Reading Room, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

⁶⁶ Library of Congress Divorce Files, Bernece Berkman Files, Manuscript Reading Room, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

unemployment. Berkman felt it necessary to increase their supplemental income and took advantage of her talent as an artist to do so.⁶⁷

The crafts and high art separation were made by Berkman herself, as evidenced in her deliberately separate identities as business owner and artist. The wallpaper company, Berk-Hunter Associates, Inc., began as a result of Berkman's talent and skills as an artist and print-maker. The idea for the company came about after creating wallpaper for her friends' home using her serigraphy knowledge. She then exhibited sample wallpaper at the Bertha Schaefer Gallery, which caught the eye of a distributor for interior decoration, Louis W. Bowen, who agreed to sell Berkman's wallpaper.⁶⁸ Bowen's company was mentioned in a well-known historical overview of wallpaper, by Joanne Kosuda Warner and Lesley Hoskins, as one of the dominant hand-printed distributors.⁶⁹ His products emphasized Renaissance-style floral prints and Neoclassical black and white patterns (Joanne Kosuda Warner and Lesley Hoskins, p. 213). Berkman would be joining through him a most prestigious—i.e., artistic—end of the interior decorating business. In 1949, Berk-Hunter Associates, Inc. was conceived, with Hunter and Berkman co-owning the company.⁷⁰

Berkman had likely known that the wallpaper business was an up-and-coming field and therefore strategically chose this occupation. Joanne Kosuda Warner and Lesley Hoskins explain the history of the wallpaper industry after World War II. During World War II, the

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Joanne Kosuda Warner and Lesley Hoskins, "Post-War Promise: Pattern and Technology up to 1790" in Lesley Hoskins, ed., *The Papered Wall: History, Pattern, Technique* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1994), 206-225.

⁷⁰ Library of Congress Divorce Files, Bernece Berkman Files, Manuscript Reading Room, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

wallpaper industry was put on a “design freeze,” because it was considered a luxury item during the war. With the war ending in 1945, the War Production Board eliminated the restrictions on wallpaper productions, and wallpaper manufacturers went into high production again. After the War, wallpaper sales skyrocketed, with the same amount of wallpaper sold in 1946-47 as there had been in all of the 1920s. The processes for screen-printed and hand-printed wallpaper had been revolutionized after the war, and the costs were low to start a screen-printing business.⁷¹

From the 1940s – 1960s, there were improvements in technology, and machine printing became more predominant. But hand-printed wallpaper was still a fashionable item. Technology advancements made hand-printing the most expensive wallpaper, with, in 1950, paper running from \$6-\$12/roll compared to machine printing being at \$2-\$6/roll. As a result, hand-printed wallpaper was still considered more exclusive than machine printed wallpaper, and established artists were hired by some wallpaper companies to increase the value of the paper. Henri Matisse screen-printed wallpaper for Katzenbach & Warren of New York, and Salvador Dali was commissioned by Schiffer of New York, in 1949, for printed fabrics. Jack Denst, owner of a screen-printing company in Chicago, 1947, claimed that wallpaper was art: “Wallpaper design is more than making a living. I am concerned with the beauty of art and its effect on our civilization.”⁷² Laverne Originals of New York “considered their work as fine art applied to hand crafts, and that as such it is not only a solution to the economic problem but it is a contribution to the culture of the country as well.”⁷³ Wallpaper reflected the rise of technology

⁷¹ Warner and Hoskins, “Post-War Promise: Pattern and Technology,” 208.

⁷² Ibid., 209.

⁷³ Ibid., 209.

and science and modern art, and Berkman was an active contribution to this technology advancement.⁷⁴

While Berkman and other renowned artists used their high art skills of printmaking to create wallpaper, and wallpaper company owners claimed their product was fine art, the textiles industry has not been considered as a very significant part of high art in the canon of art history, with only the occasional reference to Matisse or Dali examples at best. Griselda Pollock and Rozsika Parker elaborated on how craft has been situated outside the canon of art history and linked to subordinate ideals of domesticity, femininity, and the category of “women”. “Women’s” artwork has been essentialized as “lesser” as art history has privileged styles and forms of art. Painting and sculpture are at the top of the modern art hierarchy and “decorative” or “applied” arts are at the bottom, consisting of art that decorates the body, people’s homes or art that is used as utensils. The division of arts and crafts is determined by “lesser” arts being associated with domestic necessity, such as the use of a quilt, or in Berkman’s case, wallpaper. This division began during the Renaissance and is based on class and gender.⁷⁵

Parker and Pollock argued that the difference is not in how arts and crafts are made, but where they are made and for whom. Crafts are defined as made in the home and for the family, in the private sphere, the stereotypical domain of women. Fine arts are made in the public realm,

⁷⁴ In Berkman’s Library of Congress files, she discussed her wallpaper business through describing her relationship with her husband. My interpretation of her attitudes towards her business was that she felt her artistic talents were required to make the business successful, but she did not consider hand crafted wallpaper as a high art until the end of her life, when she was attempting to teach design at Pratt. While not explicitly noted in her files, I speculate that Berkman was aware of the modernist artists who were designing wallpaper, as she was particularly in tune to artistic trends of the time.

⁷⁵ A more in depth critique on craft and high art can be found in Parker and Pollock, *Old Mistresses*, 50-81.

traditionally a male space, for the market and for galleries, created in studios and art schools. Therefore, Parker and Pollock claim that art and craft do not have inherent differences of quality, but are linked to the socially constructed spaces in which they are created and used or observed.⁷⁶ Because wallpaper design and creation was related to a “domestic necessity,” it was not within the canon of high art or part of fine art institutions.

As an artist who ascribed to the ideals and conventions of high art, Berkman personally did not consider her work in the textiles industry “high art.” Rather, she saw her wallpaper company as a way of financially supporting her goal to be a part of the New York art market. However, she did feel that knowledge of textile design and construction needed to be part of the curriculum in academic institutions. While Berkman had considered her wallpaper company “just for bread,”⁷⁷ rather than deserving of high art status, Berkman later in life reconsidered this position and instead attempted to highlight the knowledge and creation of crafts as an important component of the public realm. In 1977, she commented on the absence of “craft” within academic institutions in a letter regarding a teaching position to the Pratt New York Phoenix School of Design. She stated, “As far as I have been able to ascertain there is no comprehensive course in any of the schools in this area which has this kind of information available for this specialized field [of Home Furnishings].”⁷⁸ In arguing this point, Berkman challenges the boundaries art history has established for determining high art. Not only did she challenge

⁷⁶ Parker and Pollock, *Old Mistresses*, 70.

⁷⁷ Library of Congress Divorce Files, Bernece Berkman Files, Manuscript Reading Room, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

⁷⁸ Library of Congress Correspondence Files, Bernece Berkman Files, Manuscript Reading Room, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

printmaking against the highly valued painting, she challenged high and low art in her business, and was determined to get elements of design acknowledged within major institutions, bring the private sphere of art into the public realm.

It is at this point that Berkman's perception of her identity shifts, with initially asserting that business and art are separate. For her Pratt application, though, her artistic and business success are complementary roles for her identity. Berkman described some of the conceptual and aesthetic intricacies of designing for textiles, such as creating patterns, color mixing, color transfers to screens, and the psychological effects of the patterns, which were not formally taught in other institutions. She encouraged this training and offered her background in home furnishings as evidence of her ability to teach this discipline. In addition to owning her wallcovering manufacturing business, creating her own styles and hand printing the wallcoverings, she also had experience designing other types of textiles. For example, she freelanced her wallcovering skills and worked for Kay Lewis, Inc. Home Furnishings, specializing in decorative fabrics such as drapes, bedspreads, upholstery, etc.⁷⁹ She also worked in the art department for Texstyle Creators, L.I.C., as a designer and coordinator for four years. Her designs were for apparel wear, designing prints for both men's and women's clothing.⁸⁰ Berkman's experience with textiles was a large part of her life that depended upon her advanced skills in printmaking. However, being a figure of an era that did not distinguish crafts as fine art, Berkman took on the beliefs of her social context in regards to her respect for the high art

⁷⁹ Bernece Berkman, New York, New York [to Roz Goldfarb, New York, New York] 3 August 1977, Bernece Berkman Files, Manuscript Reading Room, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

⁸⁰ Library of Congress Correspondence Files, Bernece Berkman Files, Manuscript Reading Room, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

market. It was not until later in her life that she acknowledged her experiences with craft as applicable and comparable to high art. Berkman integrating her identity as business owner and craftsperson to her high art career is her attempt at defining herself solely as a working artist.

SECTION 5

GRAPHIC ARTS IN THE 1960s

Berkman's problems with her husband complicated her personal life in the 1950s and 1960s. However, her rapidly expanding exhibition opportunities as a graphic artist helped to give her public profile a more unified identity, that is her status as part of a seemingly gender-free group of successful modern artists.⁸¹ Her focus on more abstracted aesthetics and subjects in her work put her in dialogue with the burgeoning New York artistic scene, a position noted by critics who attempted both to isolate her as a woman but also incorporate her (as she herself wanted) into general social trends.

Berkman was heavily involved with printmaking above other media. She was one of the forerunners in using the technique "relief intaglio." Berkman gave a description of the technique in one of her artist statements:

"From having been one of the early Serigraphers (1940), about 1956 [she] became interested in what was previously considered an etching process. Now this process has

⁸¹ Berkman had kept records of the artwork that she sold to individuals and small galleries. The list of works was too extensive to document for the purposes of this paper, but the breadth of her work demonstrates that she had a demand for her artwork in addition to being exhibited in institutions. The ledgers, notebooks and stacks of note cards that document her sales are in the Bernece Berkman-Hunter Files, Manuscript Reading Room, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

evolved into a new type of print called RELIEF INTAGLIO. It is rapidly being referred to as ‘Sculptured Prints’ since these impressions no longer retain a flat surface – as still do the Serigraph and the Lithograph prints.’⁸²

Technical and formal innovation was something that Berkman also felt important about her work, and she had been asked to give demonstrations of her printmaking processes for the Hartford Jewish Community Center as well as for Guild Hall.⁸³

Berkman was largely associated with graphic art organizations. However, there were three distinct institutions to which she was extremely dedicated, the American Color Print Society (ACPS), Society of American Graphic Artists (SAGA), and Pratt Graphic Center. The American Color Print Society was created in Philadelphia in 1939 as an opportunity for artists who were interested in experimenting with color prints, rather than the predominant black and white prints.⁸⁴ Berkman’s extensive involvement with the ACPS was important for incorporating her into the high art market and contributed to the attainment of the foremost identity she wanted to project, that of an artist. Yet while she was an innovator in the field of printmaking, it was a type of art that was not privileged within art history’s canon, and therefore Berkman’s leadership in the field has not be acknowledged in history.

Berkman’s participation in and exhibitions with the ACPS demonstrates her personal achievement of success within the art market. Berkman became an official member of ACPS in

⁸² Artist statement sent to Guild Hall in East Hampton, NY, November 1966, Bernece Berkman-Hunter Files, Manuscript Reading Room, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

⁸³ Bernece Berkman-Hunter Files, Manuscript Reading Room, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

⁸⁴ Richard Hood, President of ACPS, pamphlet for 29th Annual Exhibition ACPS, 1968, Bernece Berkman-Hunter Files, Manuscript Reading Room, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

March of 1958,⁸⁵ shortly after Mildred Dillion, the head of travel exhibitions for the American Color Print Society (ACPS), informed Berkman that her intaglio print, *The Wave*, had been selected for the ACPS's 19th Annual Exhibition. Her print was listed for \$55.00, and the exhibition traveled nation-wide for 18 months.⁸⁶ Berkman was one of 54 artists selected to exhibit for the 19th Annual Exhibition, out of over 300 entries from across the U.S., England, and Canada. This was the beginning of many ACPS exhibitions of which Berkman's work would be shown. Between 1958 and 1976, there were only a handful of ACPS exhibitions that did not include Berkman's art.⁸⁷ Additionally in 1968, she exhibited *Wild Sea Birds*, a collage relief and intaglio, at the 29th Annual Exhibition for ACPS in 1968.⁸⁸

Like her earlier work from the WPA, Berkman's artistic awards for the ACPS were recognized in the media. Berkman received the Sonia Watter Award for \$100 for *Duneway – Two*, in the 1969 ACPS's 30th Annual Exhibition, and the print became part of the ACPS collection of the Philadelphia Museum of Art.⁸⁹ The American Color Print Society received more press in 1969, likely due to their 30th year anniversary. In the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, Victoria Donohoe describes the foundation and premise of the ACPS:

⁸⁵ Correspondence Files, March 24, 1958, Katharine H. McCormick, treasurer of ACPS, Bernece Berkman-Hunter Files, Manuscript Reading Room, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

⁸⁶ Correspondence Files, March 3, 1958, Mrs. Mildred Dillon, head of travel exhibition for ACPS, Bernece Berkman-Hunter Files, Manuscript Reading Room, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

⁸⁷ ACPS Newsletters and Correspondence, 1958-1976, Bernece Berkman-Hunter Files, Manuscript Reading Room, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

⁸⁸ ACPS flyer for 29th Annual Exhibition, 1968, Bernece Berkman-Hunter Files, Manuscript Reading Room, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

⁸⁹ "Art News" The Philadelphia Inquirer, Sunday, March 16, 1969, Section: "Philadelphia Art Scene," by Victoria Donohoe, Article Title: "Print Club Exhibit."

“The American Color Print Society is no longer the rebel organization it was when founded in Philadelphia three decades ago. In those days monotypes, silkscreens and color prints generally were looked down upon in museum circles, and experimental processes combining several graphic media were excluded from national exhibits. The ACPS which began as a kind of ‘salon des refuses,’ through its pioneering exhibits, has gone a long way to open things up across the land for color printmakers.”⁹⁰

This public recognition of Berkman’s artistic acclaim demonstrates how she was considered at this time worthy of the canon.

Another example of Berkman’s art as part of the canon of art history, not as a woman but as an artist following contemporary formal trends, is her participation at Pratt Graphics Center. At Pratt, she had work in the 3rd International Miniature Print Exhibition, from October 21 – November 23, 1968. Fritz Eichenberg and Andrew Stasik, co-chairmen of Pratt Graphics Center, informed her that in addition to the 3rd International Miniature Print Exhibition, three more shows were going to open up, in Seattle and the east coast. Therefore, they need additional prints.⁹¹ In 1970, Berkman donated a print for the Pratt Graphics Benefit Exhibition and Sale, whose proceeds supported the Center.⁹² Berkman also exhibited in Pratt’s “Prize Winning American Prints” and “Contemporary Miniature Prints” exhibitions. Because of the shows’ popularity, both exhibitions were shown for an additional year in New York. Berkman’s

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Correspondences from Andrew Stasik, co-chairmen of Pratt Graphics Center, 1968 – 1970, Bernece Berkman-Hunter Files, Manuscript Reading Room, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

⁹² Pratt Graphics Center Benefit Exhibition and Sale flyer, January 5-January 10, 1970, Bernece Berkman-Hunter Files, Manuscript Reading Room, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

Duneway – Two was part of the “Prize Winning American Prints” exhibition while her *Sea Moon* was in the “Contemporary Miniature Prints” exhibition.⁹³

A prosperous year for Berkman’s success within the New York art market was 1966. The American Color Print Society awarded Berkman the Sonia Watter Award for \$100 for her color relief intaglio, *Sea Ledge*, at the 27th Annual Color Print Exhibition, and it became part of the Philadelphia Museum of Art collection. Furthermore *Sea Ledge*, in 1966, also received the Boston Printmakers Purchase Prize, the Dorothy Adlow Award.⁹⁴ DeCordova and Dana Museum in Lincoln, Massachusetts, therefore bought her winning print, and it became part of the distinguished collection of the Boston Public Library.⁹⁵ *Sea Ledge* also received honorable mention at Guild Hall’s Annual Exhibition that year.⁹⁶ Another print of hers, *Moon Wake* (1965), received the Andrews/Nelson/Whitehead award from the Pratt Graphic Art Center Miniature Exhibition in 1966.⁹⁷ Her acclaim at Guild Hall was especially significant, as it was a popular and renown site for high art to be shown and place for Abstract Expressionists such as William de Kooning, Lee Krasner, and Jackson Pollock to exhibit.

While Berkman was claiming her artistic identity within the art market through her graphic organizations, she was also building her social identity as an acclaimed artist within the community of East Hampton and at Guild Hall. Guild Hall was more than just an exhibition

⁹³ Correspondence from Andrew Stasik, Bernece Berkman-Hunter Files, Manuscript Reading Room.

⁹⁴ Artist statement sent to Guild Hall in East Hampton, Bernece Berkman-Hunter Files, Manuscript Reading Room.

⁹⁵ ACPS Newsletters and Correspondence, 1966, Bernece Berkman-Hunter Files, Manuscript Reading Room.

⁹⁶ Artist statement sent to Guild Hall in East Hampton, Bernece Berkman-Hunter Files, Manuscript Reading Room.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

hall; it was located in East Hampton, a destination point and hot spot, for artists to live and work. In the 1880s, East Hampton was an attraction for people who, like Berkman, enjoyed painting scenes of the sea. It was also a place of attraction for printmakers during this time. In 1945, Jackson Pollock and Lee Krasner moved to East Hampton. Since then, it became a trendy spot for artists to buy farmhouses and barns to turn into their homes and studios. By 1965-1976, the community had become an attraction for artists to exchange ideas with each other and be inspired by the nature around them. Common during this era were talks about the “unobstructed light” in East Hampton that could assist with creating tone and texture.⁹⁸

Berkman and her husband were also attracted to the area surrounding East Hampton as inspiration for art and writing. In 1954, she and her husband purchased property in nearby Bridgehampton. Borrowing money interest-free from their wallpaper distributor, Louis W. Bowen, the couple was able to get a 6-year mortgage for 20 acres of land and an old farmhouse. Berkman described:

“we began to talk of ‘buying an old barn’ and renovating it – an idea we had seen others in the Arts doing in Connecticut. Also, there was the possibility of moving our business out there. At least, it would be great to have a place where we could continue to paint and write and not lose ourselves entirely in business.... We turned ‘a jungle’ – this eye sore into a most beautiful place. It opened up old properties for miles around for others. The Hunters were the talk of the area.”⁹⁹

⁹⁸ Artists and East Hampton: A 100 Year Perspective (East Hampton: Guild Hall, 1976).

⁹⁹ Library of Congress Divorce Files, Bernece Berkman Files, Manuscript Reading Room, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

While not being centrally located within East Hampton, Berkman was in close enough to be considered an artist of the region. She stated, “We entered the Art life of the area, parties, plays at Guild Hall and the general social life....Everything was not always rosy but it seemed like ‘a good life’.”¹⁰⁰

Berkman moving to Bridgehampton and not East Hampton locates her in the proximity of famous artists, but not quite in the same location, which is symbolic of Berkman’s marginalization as an artist in history. East Hampton’s attention grew as resident artists became internationally known and became great leaders and innovators in art. In 1949, Guild Hall began its series of “Artists of the Region” exhibitions, which exhibited work of contemporary artists living within the community.¹⁰¹ A letter from Ruth Allen Wolkowska of the education committee of Guild Hall in November 1966, requested 5-6 prints of Berkman’s to be exhibited along with a show of 40 prints by Una Johnson, and a few other artists, of the Brooklyn Museum. Only 5 other regional artists were asked by Guild Hall to contribute to this show. These artists were: Mark Freeman, Ida Abelman, Marking Heming, Victor DePauw, and Nelly Perret. Of the regional artists, Berkman was one of three asked to give a talk about her methods for printmaking at the gallery opening.¹⁰² A letter to Berkman from the ACPS’s office assistant, wrote to Berkman saying that the ACPS was extremely impressed with the demonstration for her

¹⁰⁰ Library of Congress Divorce Files, Bernece Berkman Files, Manuscript Reading Room, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

¹⁰¹ Artists and East Hampton: A 100 Year Perspective, 33.

¹⁰² Correspondence from Mrs. Ruth Allen Wolkowska, East Hampton, NY, Nov. 4, 1966, Bernece Berkman-Hunter Files, Manuscript Reading Room, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

printmaking processes.¹⁰³ However, while it is evident that she was a renowned artist of the East Hampton region and Guild Hall, she was not lasting figure of the area. For example, in the book *Artists and East Hampton: A 100 Year Perspective*, Berkman is not mentioned as an exhibitor at Guild Hall within the hundred years that book covers. The book shows the many styles of art that were going on in East Hampton and the diversity of interests of the artists who lived there.

Berkman received extra publicity for her artwork in *The East Hampton Star* in November 1966, as the article, “Guild Hall Planning Various Fall Activities,” explaining when and where two of Guild Hall’s gallery openings were, as well as who would speak, and who was exhibiting. Berkman’s name was included in the article for the exhibition that had “Prints suitable for Christmas gifts” while the other exhibition was labeled “Prints for Home and Office.”¹⁰⁴ *The East Hampton Star* also published another article on December 6, 1966, with a photo of Berkman giving her printmaking demonstration at Guild Hall.¹⁰⁵ Again during the summer of 1971, Berkman exhibited with East Hampton regional artists in the “37th Annual Guild Hall Artist Members Exhibition” with William de Kooning and Lee Krasner. All pieces in the exhibition were signed limited editions.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰³ Correspondence from Enez Whipple of Guild Hall, December 1, 1966, Bernece Berkman-Hunter Files, Manuscript Reading Room, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

¹⁰⁴ *East Hampton Star Newspaper*, “Guild Hall Planning Various Fall Activities,” [17 November 1966].

¹⁰⁵ *East Hampton Star Newspaper* of East Hampton, N.Y., [6 December 1966].

¹⁰⁶ Guild Hall Annual Members Exhibitions Pamphlet, Bernece Berkman-Hunter Files, Manuscript Reading Room, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

In 1964, along with having her intaglio, *Sea Hot Day into Clouds*, shown at the ACPS 25th Annual Color Print Exhibition,¹⁰⁷ Berkman's art appeared at Guild Hall, East Hampton, New York, in the 26th Annual Guild Hall Artists Members' Exhibition. Her relief intaglio, *Unfettered Winds*, was on display at Guild Hall for \$55 for one month.¹⁰⁸ She also received honorable mention for *Rectangular Birdscape*, at the 29th Annual Guild Hall Member's Exhibition,¹⁰⁹ which was mentioned in an article, "Guild Hall Exhibit Winners," in *The East Hampton Star*, on June 15, 1967.¹¹⁰ Guild Hall was affiliated with another exhibition that year, "South Fork Artists: from Childe Hassam to Jackson Pollock," at the Brookhaven National Laboratory. Among the 24 artists in the show, Berkman's etching, *On Stocks - #1*, and her color relief intaglio, *Sea Ledge*, were displayed along with Jackson Pollock's watercolor and print, both titled, *Abstraction* (1951), Lee Krasner's *Abstraction*, oil on canvas, (1947), and William de Kooning's *Untitled Drawing*.¹¹¹ After her lifelong journey of attempting to project her most dominant identity as a working artist, Berkman finally had achieved both a dominant identity as artist both socially and within the art market.

However, difficulties in her wallpaper company and marriage escalated this year as well. In March of 1966, Oscar Hunter moved out without telling Berkman. Despite his violent rages

¹⁰⁷ ACPS 25th Annual Color Print Exhibition, 1964, Bernece Berkman-Hunter Files, Manuscript Reading Room, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

¹⁰⁸ The 26th Annual Guild Hall Artist Members' Exhibition – June 14 – July 7, 1964 Guild Hall, East Hampton, N.Y., Bernece Berkman-Hunter Files, Manuscript Reading Room, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

¹⁰⁹ Correspondence from Enez Whipple of Guild Hall, June 13, 1967, Bernece Berkman-Hunter Files, Manuscript Reading Room, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

¹¹⁰ *The East Hampton Star* newspaper of East Hampton, N.Y., "Guild Hall Names Exhibit Winners" [15 June 1967].

¹¹¹ Exhibition Pamphlet, "Annual Art Exhibit, South Fork Artists: from Childe Hassam to Jackson Pollock," June 13-22, 1967, Exhibit Hall – 26 Brookhaven Avenue, Bernece Berkman-Hunter Files, Manuscript Reading Room, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

where Berkman would have to escape from his physical and emotional abuse, she continued to work in the wallpaper business with him and his mistress until 1970, when she decided to finally leave the business.¹¹² Her status as a wife, her legal struggles over property and business ownership, the continued abuse from her husband, and her financial restrictions overwhelmed her success as an artist. Not surprisingly, she turned to the defense of her artistic skills as the means of financial security. Despite having achieved her personal goals of attaining her artistic identity among New York artists and within the art market, the collapse of her marriage and the challenge to her financial and artistic position through the divorce eventually led to the disintegration of her identities as wife, business owner, canonical artist, and social identity as an artist.

With another cultural shift taking place in the late 1960s - 1970s and change in her statuses as an artist and wife, she reestablished her Jewish identity at the Hartford Jewish Community Center.¹¹³ Her Chicago roots were then reemerged. Berkman introduced the Hartford Jewish Community Center (JCC) as a new venue to show her work in 1968.¹¹⁴ The Hartford JCC's newsletter posted a notice of her exhibit from November 24 through December 2

¹¹² Library of Congress Divorce Files, Bernece Berkman Files, Manuscript Reading Room, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

¹¹³ In her book, Lisa Bloom discusses how Jewish artists were located within American society during the Depression until modern day. This context related to Berkman because it revealed her privilege in being able to identify as a Jew in society during times when there was less social tension regarding Jews. While repressing her identity as a Jew after World War II, Berkman's Jewish affiliations reemerged in the 1960s and 1970s, at the time when second wave feminism was on the rise. Refer to Bloom's book for a more in depth analysis of Jewish women artists in America, *Jewish Identities in American Feminist Art: Ghosts of Ethnicity*, (New York, NY: Routledge, 2006), 7.

¹¹⁴ Newsletter titled "Scope," Hartford Jewish Community Center, November 1968, Bernece Berkman-Hunter Files, Manuscript Reading Room, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

at the Center, naming her as an “internationally known printmaker.”¹¹⁵ Also publicly posted was an article in an unknown newspaper, November 1968, titled “Hartford JCC Slates Exhibit by Bernece Hunter,” reports that she had four major print honors in 1966, work has been in Library of Congress, the Brooklyn Museum, Boston Museum, and Jewish Museum, and tells information about the event location and time. “Kollwitz Exhibit,” elaborates on the exhibit information, informing that she was to give a printmaking demonstration and discussion about her techniques. Her credentials are listed, stating she attended the Art Institute of Chicago, School of Fine Arts at Columbia University, was a student of Stuart Davis and Kurt Seligmann at the New School of Social Research, was in an experimental workshop at Pratt Graphic Center in Brooklyn for contemporary printmaking, and won four awards in Museum of Fine Arts in Boston exhibition.¹¹⁶ Berkman’s Jewish identity that originally brought her into the Chicago art community was the identity that she predominantly reclaimed at the end of her life. Berkman died in poverty in 1989, living illegally as an heirless, squatter in her New York art studio.¹¹⁷

¹¹⁵ “Scope,” Hartford Jewish Community Center, November 1968, Bernece Berkman-Hunter Files, Manuscript Reading Room, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

¹¹⁶ Various newspaper articles on a scrapbook page, November 1968, Bernece Berkman-Hunter Files, Manuscript Reading Room, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

¹¹⁷ Library of Congress Donor Files, Bernece Berkman Files, Manuscript Reading Room, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

SECTION 6

CONCLUSION

Throughout her life, Berkman was engaged in the major events of the era, yet she was never a leader in them, and therefore not a lasting figure. However, her intentional and active engagement in the artistic trends is noteworthy. Her various identities and style of art marginalized her, but despite this, she still was part of the New York art market at times. It was the same identities that also privileged her as well. Throughout her life, her style of art and identities both gave her agency and oppressed her. Likewise, her monograph is not written to victimize her nor glorify a heroic tale. Rather, her monograph shows how people of non-hegemonic ideals are marginalized both institutionally and ideologically, but even within the social and cultural "others," a hierarchy of privilege exists.

It is evident that newspaper articles written during her lifetime gendered her artwork merely because of her biological sex. However, it is evident that this tradition has also continued into current society, as critics still gender her artwork as lesser when re-exhibited. Today, some curators have sought to give Berkman more recognition. Since the Federal Art Project, Berkman has been re-exhibited in several art shows. Art critic Alan Artner implies in examining the 1994 exhibit, "The 'New Woman' in Chicago, 1910-45", that women who were not exhibited after the mid-1900s have "second-rate paintings." Being published in the *Chicago Tribune*, his article may have been influential to a diverse range of Chicago readers. While the Illinois Collections own few of the works of early twentieth century women artists, he felt that the show would have been more complete had more than the 23 artists who were exhibited had been shown. Artner described what he considered the most modernist paintings of the exhibition as "a decorative

version of Cubism”.¹¹⁸ Describing the work as “decorative” is a derogatory and stereotypical way of describing art by women. The aspects of the artwork that he liked, he presumed a reason for the artists’ success other than their own innovation. For example, he suspected that Flora Schofield’s piece could have been created several decades after the time period being presented since there was no date on her work, and claimed that Fritzi Brod was probably influenced by Egon Schiele before coming to America.¹¹⁹ This implies that a woman artist can do nothing more than mimic a male artist’s original work. Artner did not discuss Berkman’s work that was in the show, *South Side Chicago Series #2*, which depicts an outdoor scene of a mother and her child. He likely did not mention her work because he felt it is a successful piece, which would not contribute to his argument that women artists are “second-rate”.

In contrast, Garrett Holg uses Berkman’s painting as the image for his article in the *Chicago Sun-Times*, with the caption reading, “The angular figures, jostling forms and compressed space of Berneice Berkman’s social realist works from her ‘South Chicago’ series provide some of the most powerful images of the exhibit ‘The “New Woman” in Chicago, 1910-1945’ at the Illinois Art Gallery.”¹²⁰ While Holg points to his disappointment in the exhibit, he praises the variety of artistic styles between artists that the show provides. He claims the artists mostly portrayed realism, comparing the artists to the male artists of their time, who also painted realism. Holg states how Berkman’s work stands out among the other realist paintings with her

¹¹⁸ Alan G Artner, “Sources, motives limit ‘New Woman’ show,” *Chicago Tribune*, Arts section. [11 March 1994].

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

¹²⁰ Garrett Holg, “The ‘New Woman’ in Chicago, 1910-1945: Paintings from Illinois collections,” *Chicago Sun-Times*, [6 February 1994], 1.

angular forms, making her work some of the best in the show.¹²¹ Holg's praise of Berkman's work supports the speculation that Artner purposefully did not include Berkman in his critique because her work did not support his opinion that women are "second-rate" artists.

Unlike the anti-feminist critics of the show by Alan Artner, Holg provides both positive and negative criticism of the women artists' work. He praises Gertrude Abercrombie's and Julia Thecla's individuality in their work, while criticizes Rowena Fry's "subtle Cubist treatment that is more the product of architecture and window reflection than any critical analysis of form and space."¹²² He praises Flora Schofield's success in achieving an "abstract visual language" but then attributes her success to her studies under Fernand Leger.¹²³ This is problematic because he is not giving a female artist credit for being innovative. Being an art critic for a Chicago newspaper can perpetuate gender stereotypes about women artists in general. While Holg's analysis of Berkman's artwork was positive, his gender stereotyping can still be harmful in the way viewers perceive women's artwork as a whole. These gendered media representations demonstrate that there is still a lot of progress to be made in creating equal representations among genders.

While there have been several approaches to monographs that address biographies and artwork, they tend to focus on just one feminist framework. However, I feel that it is important multiple frameworks be applied, because it will no longer normalize the current hegemonic ideals. Rather, the feminist monograph is an attempt to recognize that all people's identities are on equal playing fields. Not one identity is worth more than another, especially within the

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² Ibid.,1.

¹²³ Ibid.,1.

capabilities of creating art. Therefore, a feminist monograph is striving to break down the hierarchy of race, gender, class, sex, etc. It seeks to no longer perpetuate negative stereotypes and to make it normalized for society to recognize, or perhaps not even question, for example, the work of women being as good as men's, just as we do not question the color red being any better than the color green. Sex is not a determinate in the capabilities of either male, female, or any other sexes in the creation of "great" art.

There is not a direct, simple path in depicting artists lives or artwork. Furthermore, how we see the lives and work of past artists today is likely not the same conditions and meaning under which their art was created. By placing art within the restrictions of the canon, it limits what we see and know and can often misrepresent not only the artist, but an entire group of people. In my interpretation of Berkman's life and career, I see her experiencing several major milestones where she was living within the middle of the high art market, but she did not become a lasting figure in the canon, because her identities did not match the hegemonic requirements it took to become part of the canon. This also shows that it is a problem that the canon privileges only a select type of art, identity, and social location. Because the art historians and major institutions set up what we as a society think is worthy of high art and of who is capable of creating it, art history is a site for the perpetuation of stereotypes and dominant ideology. This is why I see it important to integrate the social contexts with biography for figures in art history and artists outside the canon in order to provide the broadest understanding of a person's social location.

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